

BREAKING THE SILENCE: MALCOLM X

By Carl Doerner

A majority of Americans have long held the view that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other national leaders in the 1960s, however they may have been publicly explained and reported, occurred as a result of conspiracy. Plots were devised and scapegoats created. There was alteration, withholding and classification of evidence as secret. Ordinary protection of these leaders was mysteriously withdrawn and crime scenes were swiftly erased. There were commissions of inquiry and other means devised to fix a narrative regarding what had occurred and to quiet public concern. The national security state that evolved since that November 22, 1963, coup continues to imprison our thought. In this fiftieth anniversary year, breaking our silence is long overdue.

The narrative surrounding the murder of Malcolm X 48 years ago this month was for some time difficult to challenge. On February 21, 1965, while he spoke at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, a volley of gunfire killed him. Three members of his organization were convicted and imprisoned. While two of the three were not even present at the ballroom that day, two triggermen were allowed to go free. Police were always present at Malcolm's speeches; that day they were absent.

But to white America, this was just a black man who raged on the street corners of Harlem against "white devils." The press vilified him. The public took little interest.

Malcolm Little was born in 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, where his father was a lay Baptist preacher and local leader of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which promoted the emigration of Negroes back to Africa. When the local Ku Klux Klan attacked their home, the Little family moved to Wisconsin, then to East Lansing, Michigan. Their home was burned and Malcolm's father died when he was struck in the head and pushed in front of a streetcar.

Although Malcolm did well in school and aspired to be a lawyer, he left school at thirteen when an educator thwarted this ambition by suggesting he could only expect to become a tradesman, a carpenter. We can imagine the impact of these experiences on a bright boy.

As a dropout Malcolm drifted in and out of crime, mostly in Boston. Arrest and prison followed. By the time of his release he had renounced his slave name and been inspired to join Elijah Muhammad's Chicago-based Nation of Islam. The X, he said, stood for his African family name he could never know.

Now self-educated, a powerful speaker and advocate of militant black power, he proved a strong recruiter for Nation of Islam. As such, he drew surveillance by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. For some time he advocated violence and racial separation - in contrast to Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent efforts toward integration. While portrayed as foes, their eventual philosophical-tactical shift toward each other dramatically threatened the powerful in America.

Years after Malcolm's murder documentation emerged proving that to weaken the organization, the New York Police Department and the FBI infiltrated Nation of Islam's organizations. From 1956 to 1971 the FBI's secret Counter Intelligence Program (Cointelpro) harassed and infiltrated many groups, forged documents and engaged in

illegal violence, including assassination. The FBI's rationale was protecting national security and, as they wrote, "maintaining the existing social and political order."

Regarding Nation of Islam, rumors were fabricated about infidelity on the part of Elijah Muhammad in Chicago - lies that he was having sex with young women. As the FBI hoped, these fabrications angered Malcolm. He resigned and voiced outrage, creating friction between Chicago and New York branches. In March 1964, Malcolm founded rival Muslim Mosque, Inc. and the Organization of African-American Unity. FBI records reveal Cointelpro targeted communists, socialists, the civil rights movement, organizations for women's rights, the American Indian Movement and all groups protesting the Vietnam War.

Meeting Muslims of all races during his April 1964 pilgrimage to Mecca and tour of Africa opened Malcolm's eyes to a broader understanding of Islam. He now rejected racial separation. Becoming a Sunni Muslim, Malcolm adopted the name El Haj Malik El Shabazz.

He was the first public figure to blame President Kennedy's assassination on U.S. intelligence agencies. In alliance with numerous national leaders he had met in Africa, he sought to put the U.S. on trial in the United Nations for its human rights violations against African Americans. When Malcolm joined Martin in opposing the Vietnam War and strategies for change in America, they were targeted for execution.

Defending FBI's exposed role in dismembering Nation of Islam, New York director James Fox declared the FBI was not "directly" involved in the murder of Malcolm. "Maintaining the existing social and political order" of our national security state meant government agencies would conspire in, aid and abet murder.